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SUBJECT: IRIG SEES U.S. EXCHANGES AS INTENT ON SOFT OVERTHROW
REF: 2008 IRPO 70

CLASSIFIED BY: Ramin Asgard, Director, Iran Regional Presence
Office, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Since September, every International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) group from Iran has cancelled its travel to the United States, often at the last minute. Our access to participants is limited, but some have told us explicitly that they have been refused permission to travel or coerced into withdrawing from the program. The IRIG's suspicion of these programs has been present from the start, but the recent heightened measures to prohibit Iranians' participation represents an active escalation in their position. Charges leveled by the IRIG against exchange programs have lumped into a broader 'conspiracy' including NGOs, academia, minority rights activists, and others, aimed at fomenting a 'soft overthrow' of the IRIG. Despite these setbacks, however, exchanges remain an effective way to engage Iran and its people, and IRPO will work closely with the Department to explore ways to continue these vital programs. End Summary.

EXCHANGES STOPPED

¶2. (C) Since late 2006, more than 200 Iranian visitors have come to the United States through a series of exchanges sponsored by the USG. Topics for these exchanges have been purposefully apolitical to avoid enflaming Iranian suspicions. With a few exceptions (Reftel), participants in these programs have told us that various ministries, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, and even elements in the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), have supported exchanges as a way to engage the United States. President Ahmadinejad and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have publicly stated their support for exchanges between America and Iran. IVLP Alumni have also told us that these programs are instrumental in increasing partnerships and understanding between Iranians and Americans.

¶3. (C) Since September 2008, however, we have had to cancel programs in maternal health, child development, breast cancer awareness and historical research, all just days before the group's departure, and in one case, with two participants already in Dubai. Earlier this fall, participants were more circumspect in discussing reasons for their sudden change of mind. What we have ascertained is that participants often were contacted by unidentified Iranian officials or Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) officers and told not to participate, sometimes with threats to their employment.

¶4. (C) In early January, participants in the historical research program were informed that they required permission from a newly formed MFA commission set up to vet exchanges with the United States. The MFA denied their request, and we have not been able to develop further information about the commission and the scope of its authority. One participant who dealt with the MFA told us, however, that the travel ban was subject to review in two months. (NOTE: We learned Jan. 28 that an IVLP group on

substance abuse treatment, which assured us it had permission to travel, cancelled its trip, citing the inability of one participant to receive a visa before the group's scheduled departure. We do not know if this was the only factor or if the IRIG influenced its decision.)

CONSPIRACIES AND PLOTS

15. (C) This crackdown appears to be part of broader IRIG worries of public discontent. Over the past several weeks, Iranian officials have increased pressure on activists such as Shirin Ebadi, closed reformist newspapers, and repeatedly sounded the alarm of 'velvet revolution.' Observers have suggested that this crackdown may be an effort to exert control over civil society so as not to appear weak in anticipation of negotiations with the U.S., an effort to divert public attention from the country's economic problems and other domestic failures, or a real sense of vulnerability among ruling circles prior to upcoming presidential elections.

16. (C) Whatever the reason, the IRIG has chosen to focus its attention on what it believes are U.S. efforts intended to remove the regime. The head of MOIS' counterintelligence department said Jan. 19 that his agency had broken a spy ring centered around U.S. cultural exchange programs and intent on a 'soft overthrow' of the IRIG. The Iranian official claimed that the U.S. conspiracy involved the CIA, AIPAC, IREX, the Woodrow Wilson Center and the Soros Open Society Foundation and targeted Iranian professionals and elites. He implicated IRPO and other Iran Watcher posts directly and named specific USG officials in describing U.S. machinations. The counterintelligence official named Arash Alaei, an alumni of an IVLP program, and his brother Kamyar, both well-known HIVAIDS researchers, as two of four

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Iranians arrested for espionage. Arash and Kamyar were sentenced to six and three years in prison, respectively for their participation in this 'plot.'

17. (C) Separately, one IRPO contact with access to Iranian officials told us that Iranian security officials believed that U.S. intelligence, working through an American representative of the National Academy of Sciences, as well as other U.S. institutions and NGOs, sought to organize espionage networks in Iran. They believed that the Alaei brothers were part of this network.

18. (C) IRIG efforts to halt exchanges appear to extend only to groups with an official USG connection, although it seems to have produced a chilling effect. Individual Iranian scholars invited for fellowships at U.S. universities, Iranian sports teams competing or training in the U.S. and U.S. groups traveling to Iran generally have had little if any problem. The recent visit of six U.S. university presidents to Iran received extensive positive coverage in the Iranian press. Iranians participating in non-USG exchanges in the U.S. have told us they were nervous about possible attention from MOIS, however.

COMMENT

19. (C) The IRIG makes no distinction between our exchange programs and what it believes is an on-going U.S. effort to undermine it. The comments by the counterintelligence official suggest that it will continue to see any effort to engage the Iranian people without the involvement of the IRIG as interference in its internal affairs; however, continued success of sports diplomacy and the creation of the IRIG commission on exchanges suggest that the IRIG has not completely closed the door on exchange programs. What it does indicate is that the IRIG has strong suspicions about them that will have to be taken into account if IVLP exchanges and other efforts in cultural diplomacy are to go forward. Despite these setbacks, however, exchanges remain an effective way to engage Iran and its people, and IRPO will work closely with the Department to explore ways

